

VIEWPOINTS

OUR VIEW: JEFFERSON COUNTY SHOULD GIVE LAWMAKERS A SPECIFIC PLAN TO SOLVE CRISIS 2F



This mural at the University of Helwan arts academy commemorates the revolution that overthrew Hosni Mubarak in Egypt.

NEW BATTLE FOR EGYPT

Hosni Mubarak is gone, but his legacy of repressing civil rights could live on. As Martin Luther King Jr. would say, the struggle continues.

By ASHLEY MAKAR

As the U.S. and NATO intervene in Libya's war to protect civilians and the pro-democracy movements in the Middle East, Egypt's transitional government just approved a draft of a law that virtually bans strikes by workers. As an Egyptian-American from Birmingham, I wonder what the American civil rights movement has to say.

When my dad saw news photos of water cannons unleashed on Cairo protesters in the first days of the Egyptian revolution, he said, "It's like what happened in Birmingham."

After emigrating from Egypt in the late 1960s — and before moving to the Magic City for his dream job in cardiology at Brookwood Medical Center — all my dad knew about Birmingham were images of civil strife he'd seen in the newspaper: church bombings, police beatings, water cannons streaming with enough force to break skin.

When Egyptians from all walks of life came out for a "Million Man March" against the Mubarak regime, my dad said

"I'm with the people." But he was watching the revolution on satellite TV, from his recliner in Mountain Brook.

See EGYPT | Page 4F



About the writer: Ashley Makar is a writer from Birmingham who is working toward a master's of divinity at Yale University. Email: ashley.makar@gmail.com. This essay is adapted from one originally published at killingthebuddha.com.

TOM SCARRITT

Bentley takes doctor's approach to governing

The doctor's waiting room is full.

One of the biggest surprises for Alabama's new governor has been the number of really big problems he has to deal with every day, Robert Bentley said in a meeting with The



News' editorial board on Friday. His medical training has helped him know how to address those

problems, he said.

As a dermatologist practicing in Tuscaloosa, he had to focus on one patient at a time, then move on to the next patient. Every patient was different, and required his full attention. That experience, he said, has helped him focus on each of the problems the state faces without getting bogged down by the collective weight of those problems.

The crowd in the waiting room is large, but each issue gets individual attention.

The other surprise for Bentley, he said, is just how bad the state's General Fund problem is. It is by far his sickest patient.

On Thursday, Bentley had declared proration in the General Fund, cutting spending by 15 percent for the rest of the year. The cuts are needed, he said at the time, to keep the budget balanced as required by the state's constitution.

Proration makes across-the-board cuts to bring spending in line with revenues. However, the governor directed the operation in a way that made the cuts more targeted and surgical than the standard sweeping proration.

Bentley's prescription called for the Legislature to approve a supplemental spending bill that raised the General Fund budget by \$156 million, to about \$1.8 billion. That spending was targeted to agencies the governor wanted to protect, such as Medicaid and the Ethics Commission.

The supplemental spending bill did not reflect new money the state had to spend so much as it re-ordered priorities in the budget by boosting the amount allotted for specific agencies. That meant when the governor declared proration moments

See SCARRITT | Page 4F

INSIDE

Yes, the sky is falling

The cutbacks to Jefferson County courts is that dreaded train wreck, the disaster that people in the know have been fearing for years, and Family Court may get hit hardest, writes The News' Joey Kennedy. 2F

al! MORE OPINION ON AL.COM

Want to respond directly to an editorial or comment on a letter? How about offering your 2 cents' worth on Joey Kennedy's daily opinion blog? Go to www.al.com/opinion/birmingham.

HEALTH

An extensive FDA study outlines the impact on public health of menthol cigarettes. So why didn't the FDA act?



Ban of menthol cigarettes needed

By ALAN BLUM

The public entrusts the U.S. Food and Drug Administration with ensuring the safety and effectiveness of medications that improve health — not substances that cause disease.

Yet, two years ago, President Barack Obama signed into law a misguided bill supported by the American Cancer Society, the American Medical Association and most other health organizations that placed the nation's most lethal consumer product — cigarettes — under the control of the FDA.

Incredibly, the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act directs the FDA to issue safety standards for a product that kills nearly half a million Americans a year. Even cancer drugs can be pulled from the

About the writer: Alan Blum, M.D., holds the Gerald Leon Wallace, M.D., Endowed Chair in Family Medicine at the University of Alabama. Blum directs the university's Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society. Email: ablum@cchs.ua.edu.

market by the FDA if they cause more harm than benefit. Not so cigarettes, which Congress explicitly bars the FDA from banning.

Small wonder, then, why Philip Morris, maker of Marlboro, the world's largest-selling cigarette, wholeheartedly supported the bill, even as the bill's proponents were claiming that it would be the death knell for Big Tobacco.

The law only served to increase the skepticism of all too

See MENTHOL | Page 4F

JEFFERSON COUNTY

Jeffco financial ills need intensive care

By MICHAEL E. FLEENOR

It doesn't take a doctor to recognize that Jefferson County finds itself in the financial equivalent of "intensive care." After the Alabama Supreme Court declared \$74 million in occupational taxes unconstitutional this year, the new County Commission is feverishly searching for a cure.

Earlier aggressive action

About the writer: Michael E. Fleenor, M.D., M.P.H., is health officer for Jefferson County. Email: wanda.heard@jcdh.org.

could have averted a lot of this pain. It didn't happen. Our new county commissioners now say, "Everyone now has to feel the pain." In particular, the Jefferson County Department of Health has specifically been

named to absorb that pain.

The fact of the matter is that we already have felt the pain. The Health Department faced some of the same problems the county faces now in the late 1990s through 2005. Besides seeing early on that the county would likely be facing financial challenges that could affect our funding, we faced increasing expenses and flat revenues (spe-

cial county sales and property taxes) that would affect our ability to protect the public's health in the future.

We moved strategically, decisively and aggressively, and it hurt badly. But the pain was worth it. Over the following seven-year period, seven rounds of layoffs reduced our work



Reductions in funding to the Health Department will have ramifications for public health care.

See JEFFCO | Page 4F